Welfare Rights Service May 2023

Benefit Matters

Our newsletter for advisers in Royal Greenwich

Finance and Legal Services Directorate

Spring 2023 Budget Highlights

The Spring Budget on 15 March announced an employment package aimed at 'removing barriers for people who want to work'. The reforms focus on the long-term sick and disabled, benefit claimants, unemployed people, older workers, and parents. Plans include a tougher sanctions regime, increased work search requirements and extending them to more groups including lead carers of young children. The government expects these measures to result in 110,000 more people in work. We explore some of the key measures and their potential impact on claimants below.

Abolishing the work capability assessment

The government's 15 March 2023 Health and Disability White Paper proposes new rules from 2026/27 to abolish the work capability assessment (used to assess entitlement to Employment and Support Allowance and sickness-based Universal Credit) to 'give people confidence to try work, so that those who are able to can progress in or towards work, without the worry of being reassessed or losing their benefits'.

Other proposals include:

- **scrapping limited capability for work and limited capability for work related activity statuses** – leaving all Universal Credit (UC) claimants potentially open to work-related requirements as determined by their work coach. The proposed changes would mean the end of work capability assessment (WCA) appeals – currently a significant proportion of total appeals, with the majority found in favour of claimants. Decisions by work coaches about work-related requirements under the proposed new system would be discretionary and not carry the same right of appeal as WCA decisions.
- **introducing a new health element in UC payable only to claimants also receiving Personal Independence Payment (PIP) –** this would replace the additional 'support' element in UC (for people found to have limited capability for work-related activity - LCWRA). Some claimants will lose the LCWRA component and will be unable to access the new health element because they cannot get PIP. This is because although similar, PIP and WCA assessments measure different things. People with shorter-term conditions will also be excluded as a result.

Although the WCA has been controversial and subject of much criticism since its introduction, the prospect of its removal has provoked dismay. Concerns raised include:

- decisions on capability will be made by non-medically qualified work coaches.
- there will be no equivalent 'substantial risk' rule under the new procedure which currently provides an additional entitlement route for vulnerable claimants (eg with mental ill-

Continued next page…

Welfare Rights Service Advisers Advice Line
020 8921 6376
E: wrs.ce@greenwich.gov.uk
Weekdays: office hours

Welfare Rights Service Public Advice Line
020 8921 6375
Mon, Wed, Thurs: 10am – 1pm
Via online contact form on website

Universal Support Team
020 8921 3333
Mon to Fri: 10am - 4pm
Via online contact form on website

health) who are found not to have limited capability for work under the normal rules.

- fears that the new work-related activity requirements will leave vulnerable claimants at risk of sanction at a time when sanctions are at a record high and at risk of increasing further due to changes in government policy

Useful links

[CPAG briefing examining the implications of the abolition of the work capability assessment]

Increased childcare support for working parents

Universal Credit childcare changes from Summer 2023

The government's announcement that the Universal Credit maximum childcare element will be increasing from July 2023 has been widely welcomed. The new monthly rates will be:

- £950.92 for one child (the current rate is £646.35)
- £1,630.15 for two or more children (currently £1,108.04).

Parents on UC will also be able to receive childcare support upfront when moving into work or increasing their hours instead of in arrears. It is hoped that this will help remove a barrier people face when moving into work by making childcare more affordable.

Changes to free early learning places for under 5s

Working parents in England will also be able to access 30 hours of free childcare a week, for 38 weeks of the year, from when their child is 9 months old to when they start school.

The changes will be rolled out in stages. Full details are not yet known. But a timeline of what we know so far is set out below - all of which are subject to parliamentary approval.

Date	What's changing?
From Sept 2023	Changes to regulations around staff-to-child ratios for 2-year-olds in group care settings Flexibilities for childminders to have more than the specified maximum number of children under 5 where other minded children under 5 are siblings or are their own babies/children
From April 2024	15 hours 'free care' extended to all working parents of 2-year-olds during term-time
From Sept 2024	15 hours free care extended to all working parents of children aged 9 months to 4 years old (excludes 4-year-olds in reception)
From Sept 2025	30 hours free care extended to all working parents of children aged 9 months up to 4 years old (excludes 4-year-olds in reception)
By Sept 2026	The government is providing additional funding to local authorities over two academic years, starting in September 2024 to enable most primary schools to provide wraparound care (from 8am to 6pm) to support working parents.

Greenwich Early Years have produced this helpful graphic for parents – visit the website for further information.

Whilst Child Poverty Action Group (CPAG) have broadly welcomed the childcare plans and described the changes as a big step forward, they have highlighted that 'the eligibility criteria for the new places excludes low-income parents in jobs with low or variable hours and those preparing for their return to work". CPAG's Chief Executive Alison Garnham has said that the government is at risk of giving with one hand while taking with the other if low-income children are excluded from the new childcare support.

Useful links

- UC and childcare costs: Government Response to Work and Pensions Committee
- Help with childcare costs (England) Briefing Paper – House of Commons Library
- CPAG Press release

Universal Credit

Changes include:

- **Further rises in the administrative earnings threshold (AET)** – this is the amount at which UC claimants are expected to look for more or better paid work. The minimum amount a UC clamant can earn without being asked to meet regularly with their work coach increases to £812 per month (or the equivalent of 18 hours at the national living wage). The current threshold for a single person is £617 per month (or 15 hours at the national living wage). The couple AET will be removed altogether meaning that non-working or low earning partners will be asked to look for work regardless of their partner's earnings.

  The government estimates that more than 100,000 more claimants (including people already in part-time work) will move from 'light touch' to 'intensive' work search requirements or risk being sanctioned. These increases are in addition to the previously implemented/ announced rises – see October 2022 Benefit Matters for details.

- **Tougher Universal Credit sanctions regime**
  The government's announcement that UC sanctions will be strengthened, with additional training for work coaches to ensure that they are 'applying sanctions effectively' and to automate parts of the process during a cost-of-living crisis has come under fierce criticism. DWP staff's own PCS union describes the measures as a 'massive attack on claimants' that will herald a 'computer says no' culture.

- **Changes to decision-making and extending work search to more groups** – up to 700,000 lead carers of young children who would previously have had limited, or no work requirements will be 'encouraged' to look for work or increase their hours for the first time.

- **Expanding the Additional Jobcentre Support Pilot** – requiring unemployed UC claimants who are still unemployed after 3 and 6 months on UC to attend the jobcentre every day for 2 weeks. The government also intends to trial a scheme that rewards DWP staff for helping claimants into work. This will purportedly involve staff competing for bonuses for getting people into work with the introduction of league tables and a £250 bonus for staff getting the most people into work each month.

Help with energy bills

The Energy Price Guarantee limits the amount a typical household pays on their energy bill. The Spring Budget announced that it will remain fixed at £2,500 for an additional 3 months to June 2023. Note that this should not be confused with support under the Energy Bills Support Scheme which has come to an end. Check our Fuel Debt Update for recent developments including reduced charges for prepayment meter customers and new Ofgem guidance.

For further information

- Policy Paper: Spring Budget 2023 factsheet – Labour Market Measures
- Spring Budget 2023 Budget in full

April Benefit Changes

Changes to PIP, DLA and AA terminal illness 'special' rules

Special rules are in place which provide simplified and fast-tracked access to certain benefits for people who are nearing the end of life. The rules also allow benefits (Attendance Allowance (AA), Personal Independence Payment (PIP), Disability Living Allowance (DLA), Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) and Universal Credit) to be paid without being subject to a waiting period or needing a medical assessment. Most people will also receive higher rates of benefits.

New regulations from 3 April, extend the definition of terminal illness for purposes of claiming PIP, DLA or AA to people with a progressive disease where death can be reasonably expected within twelve months (this replaces the old six-month rule). The extended definition was introduced in April 2022 for Universal Credit and Employment and Support Allowance (ESA).

Claims under the new rules should be made using an SR1 form – the DS1500 form is being phased out. However, the DWP are accepting both forms until an unspecified date.

The updated Guidance: 'Special Rules': how the benefit system supports people nearing the end of life' is available on GOV.UK.

2023/4 Benefit uprating

Most social Security benefits are uprated by 10.1% uprating from April in line with inflation and the September 2022 Consumer Price Index. However, Local Housing Allowance rates (used to work out how much Housing Benefit or Universal Credit private tenants can get towards their rent) have not been uprated and remain frozen at 2020/21 levels. See the February 2023 issue of Benefit Matters for more on the 2023/4 benefits uprating and note that our 2023/4 Benefit Rates cards are now available.

Changes to Support for Mortgage Interest (SMI) Scheme for homeowners

Support for low-income[1] homeowners needing financial support with the interest charges on a mortgage or eligible home repairs, or improvement loan is provided by the Support for Mortgage Interest (SMI) loan scheme. New regulations introduce the following changes from 3 April to 'support more households with the cost of living'.

- UC claimants can now access support after three months on UC (instead of nine months).
- Claimants no longer need to be unemployed and receiving zero earnings to qualify for support. This means that claimants with earnings are now eligible to claim. Under previous rules, claimants receiving any earnings at all (regardless of the amount) were ineligible for SMI loan support.
- New linking rules enable SMI loan support to be paid immediately, without the need to serve another waiting period, for example, for:
  - UC claimants reclaiming UC within six months of a previous claim;
  - Income Support or income-based ESA/JSA claimants applying for UC within a month of these claims ending;
  - Mixed age couples - where one member of the couple is a Pension Credit (PC) claimant receiving loan payments when the joint UC claim begins, or the pensioner claimant was receiving SMI payments in PC and the UC claim begins within one month of PC ending.

SMI loans are repayable interest-bearing loans which will need to be repaid once the property has been sold or ownership transferred/assigned, or if the claimant or their partner dies (normally from the proceeds of the sale or from the estate).

The government press release confirms that support will now be automatically offered to UC claimants after three months on UC – they don't need to do anything else but have the right to accept or reject the loan. Claimants should get independent legal and financial advice before deciding whether to accept a loan.

For further information
3 April Press release
Support for Mortgage Interest on GOV.UK

[1] Receiving Income Support, income-based JSA, income-related ESA, Universal Credit or Pension Credit

UC Managed Migration begins for more tax credits claimants

A 28 March 2023 statement by the Minister of State for Employment, Guy Opperman confirms that the UC managed migration programme will be expanded to all claimants receiving tax credits only in 2023/24. Managed migration is a DWP term to describe the process of forcibly moving 'legacy' benefit claimants to UC. It has been ramped up since the pandemic when it was temporarily paused.

Mr Opperman confirms that the number of migration notices issued to tax credit claimants will increase each month throughout 2023/24. It aims to start migrating claimants in every DWP region in Great Britain by September 2023 and in every jobcentre by the end of March 2024.

All remaining legacy claimants (except for ESA claimants[2]) will be migrated to UC in 2024/25.

What should tax credit claimants do now?
Nothing - please stress to claimants that they should not take any action until they receive a migration notice sometime during 2023/4.

Remember that some claimants will not be better off on UC (such as some carers and parents of children not receiving highest rate Disability Living Allowance care component) and switching before they are formally migrated will mean that they will lose out on transitional protection. It is possible to switch early, however claimants need to tread carefully and get specialist advice before doing so to ensure they would be better off. There is no transitional protection for claimants who are worse off after naturally migrating to UC (eg due to a change in their circumstances or because they have switched voluntarily) and it will not be possible to reclaim their old benefits at a later date

Once the migration notice is issued
The notice will confirm what action they need to take – time limits apply. Claimants failing to act on the migration notice risk losing their benefits.

Claimants who are manage migrated will receive transitional protection in their UC award if their maximum UC is lower than their current benefits to ensure that they are not worse off as a result at the point of transfer.

DWP guidance on what claimants need to do once they have received a migration notice is on GOV.UK.

How to claim
Claims can be made online or via the UC Migration Notice Helpline on 0800 169 0328. Claimants needing longer to claim can request more time.

Citizens Advice Bureau's Help to Claim Service (0800 144 8444) is available for claimants needing additional support to clam UC. The service has been extended to 31 March 2024.

Help is available from our Universal Support Team (020 8921 3333) for UC claimants needing support to manage their claim (such as difficulties with budgeting or managing their online account).

The DWP press release is available on GOV.UK

Changes to Council Tax Support Scheme (CTS)

The updated Council Tax Support (CTS) Scheme is now in place. Changes have been made to the eligibility conditions from April 2023 to enable more people of working age to be supported. To recap:

1. the taper has been reduced from 20% to 15%. for working age claims - this enables someone in work to keep an extra 5p per £1 of their earnings (worth on average £110 more a year). It will also mean that more claimants will be entitled to hardship payments as more people become eligible for support.
2. non-dependant deductions for working age claims (where another adult is living in the household) replaced by a flat rate of £5 per week regardless of earnings level. Previously they were variable rate deductions dependent on the non-dependant's income and circumstances.
3. discretionary payments of up to £100 for existing CTS claimants (not already receiving maximum CTS support) via the government's new Council Tax Support Fund. The award will be sufficient to discharge remaining council tax liability for 2023/4. The 2023/4 hardship payment of up to £100 is payable to both working age and pension age CTS claims and will be paid automatically.

The 20% taper and non-dependant deductions remain unchanged for pension age claims as these are prescribed by regulations.

[2] Claimants receiving both ESA and tax credits will also be required to move to UC in 2024/25. Manage migration for other ESA claimants has been deferred to 2028

2023-4 Cost of Living Payments

Cost-of-living payments are being repeated in 2023/4 with similar rules and increased amounts for people receiving certain benefits or over pension age and receiving winter fuel payments. The table below sets out the qualifying dates/periods (where available) and when people can expect to receive them.

Type of cost-of-living payment	Payment number	Receiving a qualifying benefit on qualifying date or during qualifying period	How much?	Payable when?
Low income benefits and tax credits[3]	1st payment	26/1/23 to 25/2/23	£301	Between 25/4/23 to 17/5/23 for most people (or between 2-9/5/23 for tax credits only claimants)
	2nd payment	Not yet unannounced	£300	Autumn 2023 for most people
	3rd payment	Not yet announced	£299	Spring 2024 for most people
Disability[4]	Single payment *Can be paid in addition to low-income or pension payments*	Not yet announced	£150	Summer 2023
Pensioners[5]	Single payment payable with Winter Fuel Payment (WFP). *Can be paid in addition to disability payment*	Not yet announced (people born before 25/9/57 qualify for 2023/4 WFP)	£150 or £300	From November 2023

Cost of living payments and claimants receiving hardship payments

The DWP confirms in updated guidance on 17 April 2023 that cost-of-living payments can be made to claimants with a nil award of UC due to a sanction if they were receiving a hardship payment during the relevant qualifying period.

Public Law Project would like to hear your views about cost-of-living payments

The Public Law Project (PLP) is working on a response to the Work and Pensions Committee inquiry into cost-of-living support payments. They'd like to hear from organisations with experience of people missing out on the first cost of living payment due to a UC sanction, fluctuating income or timing issue and anyone who has not yet received a payment and has struggled financially as a result. If you'd like to respond, email Jagna at j.olejniczak@publiclawproject.org.uk – the deadline is 10 May. Further information is available here.

Greenwich Supports

Visit the Greenwich Supports section of the Royal Greenwich website for useful information for residents struggling with benefits, everyday costs, food and supporting their families and check the online directory for details of support offerings across the borough, from warm spaces to advice hubs and community centres.

DWP pilot scheme for victims of domestic abuse

The new scheme began in February in which participating jobcentres will provide victims of domestic abuse with a safe, discreet, and confidential space to access information on specialist support services or call a friend/family member for help. The ANI (Action Needed Immediately) scheme is being trialled in 14 jobcentres and is already in place in 5,000 pharmacies across the UK.

You can find out the nearest location offering the scheme by using the government's postcode checker. People needing help can approach a member of staff and Ask for ANI or to use a Safe Space.

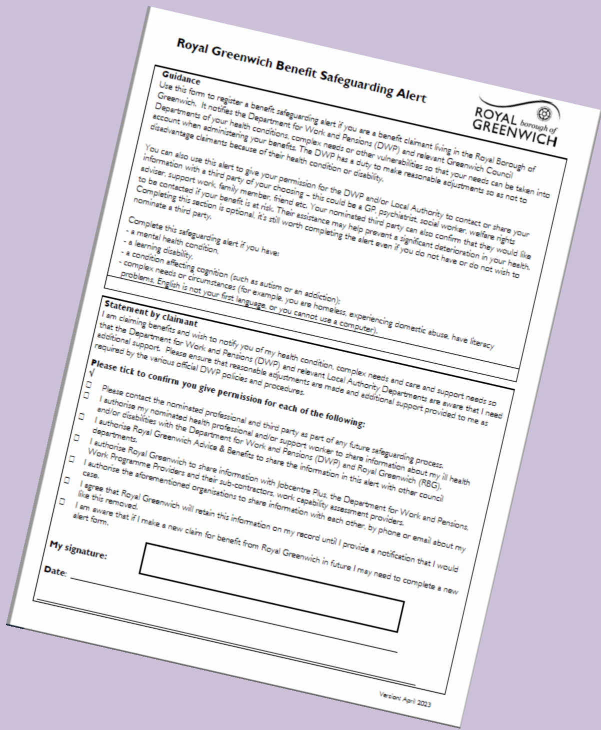
[3] Receiving Universal Credit, Income Support, income-based JSA, income-related ESA, Pension Credit or tax credits
[4] Receiving qualifying disability benefit eg Attendance Allowance, DLA, PIP or Armed Forces Independence Payment
[5] Entitled to a Winter Fuel Payment for winter 2023/24

A list of participating jobcentres is available here https://www.gov.uk/government/news/domestic-abusers-face-crackdown-in-raft-of-new-measures At the time of writing the list did not include any jobcentres in London.

Useful links

- Ask for ANI domestic abuse codeword – guidance for pharmacies
- Enough campaign
- Hestia Safe Spaces webpage

Safeguarding vulnerable claimants



Royal Greenwich Benefit Safeguarding Alert

ROYAL borough of GREENWICH

Guidance

Use this form to register a benefit safeguarding alert if you are a benefit claimant living in the Royal Borough of Greenwich. It notifies the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and relevant Greenwich Council Departments of your health conditions, complex needs or other vulnerabilities so that your needs can be taken into account when administering your benefits. The DWP has a duty to make reasonable adjustments so as not to disadvantage claimants because of their health condition or disability.

You can also use this alert to give your permission for the DWP and/or Local Authority to contact or share your information with a third party of your choosing – this could be a GP, psychiatrist, social worker, welfare rights adviser, support work, family member, friend etc. Your nominated third party can also confirm that they would like to be contacted if your benefit is at risk. Their assistance may help prevent a significant deterioration in your health. Completing this section is optional, it's still worth completing the alert even if you do not have or do not wish to nominate a third party.

Complete this safeguarding alert if you have:
- a mental health condition,
- a learning disability,
- a condition affecting cognition (such as autism or an addiction);
- complex needs or circumstances (for example, you are homeless, experiencing domestic abuse, have literacy problems, English is not your first language, or you cannot use a computer).

Statement by claimant

I am claiming benefits and wish to notify you of my health condition, complex needs and care and support needs so that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and relevant Local Authority Departments are aware that I need additional support. Please ensure that reasonable adjustments are made and additional support provided to me as required by the various official DWP policies and procedures.

Please tick to confirm you give permission for each of the following:
√
- ☐ Please contact the nominated professional and third party as part of any future safeguarding process.
- ☐ I authorise my nominated health professional and/or support worker to share information about my ill health and/or disabilities with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and Royal Greenwich (RBG).
- ☐ I authorise Royal Greenwich Advice & Benefits to share the information in this alert with other council departments.
- ☐ I authorise Royal Greenwich to share information with Jobcentre Plus, the Department for Work and Pensions, Work Programme Providers and their sub-contractors, work capability assessment providers.
- ☐ I authorise the aforementioned organisations to share information with each other, by phone or email about my case.
- ☐ I agree that Royal Greenwich will retain this information on my record until I provide a notification that I would like this removed.
- ☐ I am aware that if I make a new claim for benefit from Royal Greenwich in future I may need to complete a new alert form.

My signature:

Date:

Version: April 2023

With Universal Credit sanctions at double their pre-pandemic levels, advisers have a key role to play in supporting vulnerable residents.

The DWP should apply special safeguarding procedures (known as 'complex needs' procedures) before referring a claimant for a sanction if they are deemed to be vulnerable. For example:

- extra checks should be carried out before sanctioning to ensure the claimant understands their work-related requirements and to find out their reasons for not complying.
- at least 2 home visits should be attempted if the claimant's health condition affects their ability to leave home. Sanction referrals shouldn't be made until these and all other contact attempts have failed.

Examples of complex needs includes mental ill health, learning disability, condition affecting cognition (such as autism), language barrier, addiction, literacy difficulties. A claimant may also have complex needs due to their personal circumstances, such as domestic abuse, refugee, recently released from prison, homeless.

The complex needs/safeguarding procedures are not always recognised or acted on appropriately. Decisions are based on work coach discretion who may lack the time or knowledge to take appropriate action. The DWP has a duty to make reasonable adjustments so as not to disadvantage claimants because of their health condition or disability.

Benefit claimants living in Royal Greenwich can use our **Benefits safeguarding alert form** (available on the Royal Greenwich website) to register a safeguarding alert to enable them to notify the DWP and relevant Greenwich Council Departments of their health conditions, complex needs or other vulnerabilities so that their needs can be taken into account when administering their benefits.

The safeguarding alert form enables them to:

- spell out how their condition affects their ability to cope with the benefits system;
- notify DWP about additional support they may need while claiming (reasonable adjustments);
- (optional) authorise the DWP and/or Local Authority to contact or share their information with a third party of their choosing (for example, a GP, psychiatrist, social worker, welfare rights adviser, support worker, family member or friend);
- the nominated third party can also confirm that they would like to be contacted if the claimant's benefit is at risk.

Useful Child Poverty Action Group resources

- Universal Credit and sanctions factsheet
- 'UC, mental health and reasonable adjustments' - Welfare Rights Bulletin article - Aug 22

Greenwich Advice Network (GAN) and Greenwich Advisers Forum (GRAF)

The last Greenwich Advisers Forum (GRAF) meeting was on 27 March and focused on supporting residents affected by or at risk of receiving Universal Credit sanctions. Rebecca Lough (Welfare Rights Service Performance Manager) covered a range of issues including safeguarding vulnerable claimants, challenging sanctions, and sources of emergency support. Deborah Omope and Steven Scott from Jobcentre Plus covered reasonable adjustments and the claimant commitment.

The next virtual Greenwich Advice Network (GAN) meeting will be on **Tuesday 6 June, 10am to 12pm** and the discussion topic will be **Support for children in Royal Greenwich** with a particular focus on help with childcare costs (following the announcements about extended provision in the Spring Budget), free school meals and support from Pupil Benefits.

If you are not already on the mailing list and would like to receive information about future meetings, please email your contact details (name, organisation, and contact number) to sandra.pierre@royalgreenwich.gov.uk

Project Update

Over £1 million raised for Greenwich pensioners

Greenwich Welfare Rights Services has been particularly focused on maximising income for pensioners over the last year. This has been done through take-up work by proactively targeting pensioner households, as well as via the outreach advice hubs and other advice work.

As a result, we have generated over £1 million (£1,046,390) of additional income through Pension Credit and Attendance Allowance awards from cases opened from January 2022. This figure does not include those contacted who are still pending an outcome. Generating this additional income means a vulnerable group have more money to support themselves and puts more money back into the local community.

Training news

May courses with availability include:

- **Benefits and Limited Capability for Work (Face-to-Face) – 10th May, 10am to 4pm**
- **Dealing with Fuel Poverty (Online) – 11th May, 10am to 1pm**
- **Welfare Benefits Update (Online) – 15th and 16th May, 10am to 1pm***
- **Support with the cost of living (Online) – 23rd May, 1 to 4pm***

**One day course which is spread over 2 half-days.*

Please see the flyers included with this mailing for full details.

Book your place by emailing your details and the name of the course you wish to attend to wrs.training@royalgreenwich.gov.uk You will also need to provide confirmation from your manager that they have authorised your attendance.

Places are limited, so book soon to avoid disappointment!

Spotlight on Money Matters - Fuel Debt Update

Since our last Spotlight on Money Matters, developments have moved quickly in the world of fuel debt. We're focusing this spotlight on the latest position regarding prepayment meters, as many of you will have seen the recent extensive press coverage around this issue.

Force fitting of prepayment meters – Ofgem issues new guidance

In February 2023, The Times newspaper published their expose of British Gas agents breaking into the homes of vulnerable individuals to force fit prepayment meters. Following this, and after British Gas and several other suppliers voluntarily put a hold on the practice, Ofgem intervened. Initially instructing suppliers to pause the practice, this hold has now been lifted following new guidance issued by Ofgem on 18 April 2023.

We have summarised the main points below but would strongly recommend that you read the full guidance for an in depth understanding of this latest development.

The overarching principle is that prepayment meters should only be installed by force as a last resort and if it is safe and reasonably practicable. This means that if your client engages with their supplier to set up a payment plan to address their arrears, a prepayment meter should not be fitted unless they choose to have one. Under the guidance, suppliers are required to make at least 10 attempts to contact a client using a variety of different mediums, before progressing to a forced meter. However, where clients consistently fail to engage with their supplier, Ofgem has left the door open for them to force fit a prepayment meter, depending on the circumstances.

Vulnerable customers have been divided into 2 groups.

- **High risk** – prepayment meter can never be fitted by force
- **Medium risk** – prepayment meter can sometimes be fitted by force

The high-risk group includes:

- Households with a very elderly occupant – over 85 years old
- Households requiring a continuous supply for health reasons, including dependence on any energy powered medical equipment
- Customers dependent on a warm home for medical reasons
- Households with chronic, severe, or terminal health conditions

The medium risk group includes:

- Households where there are children under 5 or elderly occupants over 75 years
- Other serious medical/health conditions
- Serious mental/developmental health conditions
- Temporary situations, such as pregnancy or bereavement

The guidance also encourages suppliers to consider whether a prepayment meter is safe and reasonably practicable for any household with adults over 65 and/or children under 16.

For those not in the high-risk group, suppliers can use their discretion to decide whether to force fit a meter, by considering the individual circumstances of the case. This means that if your client isn't high risk, and doesn't want a prepayment meter, they will need to provide their supplier with detailed information about their circumstances and preferably also make an offer to address the arrears a different way, for example by setting up a payment arrangement or agreeing to deductions under the fuel direct scheme. If the supplier still insists that a meter is fitted, a formal complaint should be made to the supplier in question, and your client should be prepared to escalate this to Ofgem.

What must suppliers consider if a meter is fitted by force?

The guidance includes action to ensure that once a prepayment meter is fitted by force, the supplier takes active steps to assist the client to manage the meter.

Ability to pay - The meter will be calibrated to collect a sum towards the arrears and the ongoing consumption. Suppliers must accept information (including budgets and affordable payment offers) and third-party authority forms, from any credible debt advice provider. This includes The Money Advice Team here at Greenwich, Greenwich CAB, and Debt Free Advice. They should accept the lowest possible payment towards arrears if this is all that the client can afford, particularly if their ongoing usage charges are high.

New Involuntary prepayment meter to come pre-loaded with credit – Suppliers will add a £30 credit, accessible immediately, at the point of installation. This should ensure your client has access to fuel in the short term. The £30 credit is added to their debt and recouped through the meter by instalments.

Audio or bodycam recording – Those fitting the meter must retain audio or camera recording of visits and make these available for audit.

Install smart a smart prepayment meter as a default rather than a traditional key/card set up – this makes it as easy as possible to top up credit and monitor usage.

Aftercare - Suppliers must check in shortly with clients shortly after installation and then again regularly to check they can operate the meter.

And in the longer term, **suppliers to monitor top-ups and consumption** to identify self-rationing and/or self-disconnection. They should take steps to understand the reasons for self-disconnection and offer appropriate support including additional support credit and ultimately thinking about removing the meter altogether if the client is struggling to maintain a regular supply.

Alongside the revised guidance, Ofgem has also called on suppliers to review any recent cases where a customer has been switched from credit mode to prepayment mode, remotely via switching the mode on a prepayment meter or physically by obtaining a warrant and forcing entry for traditional meters. Where the supplier identifies that a prepayment meter was unsuitable, for example because the client is vulnerable (such as they fall within the high or medium risk groups described previously) they should consider removing the meter and if appropriate, award financial compensation.

Ofgem have launched a national call for evidence asking customers to share their experiences of moving to a prepayment meter. The idea is that this will enable them to act against suppliers who have fallen short of the expected standards and provide evidence for the ongoing investigation into possible breaches of licence conditions at British Gas. There is an online form (www.castevenage.org.uk/ppm) and telephone line (0800 464 3374), both hosted by Citizens Advice. The form/phone line is designed to gather evidence only, with no advice provided. Vulnerable clients who have had a prepayment meter fitted against their wishes should complete the online form or call the number to complete it over the phone.

Other changes

Charges reduced for prepayment customers
This positive change was announced as part of the recent budget and means that those who pay for their energy through a prepayment meter will pay no more than people using other methods such as direct debit.

Suppliers need claimant consent to apply Fuel Direct deductions to benefits
A one-year temporary pause was placed on the suppliers' right to seek deductions in April 2022. This meant that a client would have to agree to Fuel Direct being used to address their gas or electricity arrears. This hold has now been extended indefinitely so suppliers must seek consent from their customers to request new or increased deductions from the DWP for fuel arrears.

The importance of The Priority Services Register (PSR)
It's vital that vulnerable clients let their fuel supplier know by asking to be placed on their PSR. This is the clearest way to indicate that fitting a prepayment meter by force is inappropriate. It may be that in the future, being on the register will determine whether they are in the high or medium risk group and the payment

options offered. Ofgem are considering setting up a national scheme to replace the current system, where each supplier has their own PSR, but no details are available currently about how this will work.

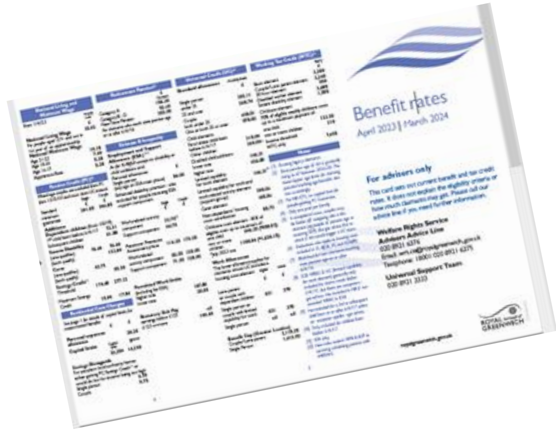
The Energy Rebate scheme has come to an end, but many vouchers still haven't been redeemed
Clients who have a traditional prepayment meter which they top up via a key or card received their energy rebate in voucher form. These vouchers have a shelf life of about 3 months but can be extended or replaced by contacting the supplier. It's always worth checking that vulnerable clients with this type of meter have redeemed all their vouchers and if necessary, assisting them to pursue replacement vouchers.

New Dealing with Fuel Poverty Course

If you'd like to learn more about how to help residents manage fuel debts, limited places are still available on our online half-day Dealing with Fuel Poverty course on 11th May. Please see the flyer attached with this mailing for more information.

Publicity Update

2023-24 Benefit Rates Cards



Our updated Benefit Rates cards are now in stock. Council staff based in The Woolwich Centre can collect stocks for their teams from us Monday to Friday from 2 to 5pm. If you would like to place an order, but need it posted to you, email your request to Carly Larkins (carly.larkins@royalgreenwich.gov.uk). Remember to include your name, address and quantity needed in your email. Local organisations based in Woolwich can also arrange to collect their orders within the above hours by emailing Carly.

Factsheet updates

We are currently working on updating our factsheets – these will be uploaded to the Royal Greenwich website as they become available.

Remember – if you need advice about a resident or family you are working with, call our advice line for advisers and staff (020 8921 6376)

If you would like this information in another format (for example in large print), please email WRSTraining@royalgreenwich.gov.uk.

Next issue: July 2023

Royal Greenwich Welfare Rights Service produces 'Benefit Matters'. If you would like to contribute in any way, please email Sandra Pierre (sandra.pierre@royalgreenwich.gov.uk

ROYAL borough of GREENWICH

Welfare Rights Service
The Woolwich Centre
35 Wellington Street
Woolwich SE18 6HQ
Telephone 020 8921 6375
Textphone 18001 020 8921 6375
www.royalgreenwich.gov.uk/welfarerights